Clinton's Top 3 Cabinet Nominations

By Helen Dewar and Kenneth J. Cooper
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The Senate swiftly confirmed President Clinton's three top Cabinet nominations yesterday as lawmakers of both parties brushed aside their campaign hostilities and joined in gestures of goodwill toward the newly inaugurated chief executive.

After brief accolades to the nominees, the Senate confirmed former Finance Committee chairman Lloyd Bentsen (D-Tex.) as treasury secretary, former House Armed Services Committee chairman Les Aspin (D-Wis.) as defense secretary and attorney Warren M. Christopher, a trusted Clinton adviser, as secretary of state.

Their nominations were approved by voice vote without dissent, without even a hint of criticism for any of the three, each of whom had earlier breezed through hearings before friendly Senate committees.

Bentsen was the first to be confirmed in a demonstration of what Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell (D-Maine) described as the "high regard" that senators hold for their former colleague, a sentiment that was enthusiastically echoed by Minority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.).

Democratic and Republican leaders then cleared the way for action today on 11 more nominations, including those of seven department heads, all of whom are expected to be confirmed with little, if any, dissent.

While the Senate often acts within hours after a new president is sworn in to begin confirming his Cabinet selections, especially those responsible for national security, the speed and unanimity of its action yesterday underscored the almost buoyant mood as Congress played host to Clinton's inauguration.

In an exchange typifying the bipartisan yearning for an end to the sour relations that prevailed between Congress and the White House in the last years of the Bush administration, leaders of both parties presented Clinton with a plaque containing a replica of the key to the large bronze doors to the Capitol Rotunda.

Although there is a tradition that a president only visits the Capitol when congressional leaders invite him, the key amounts to "an advance invitation to come any time you wish . . . and bring us to your consultation as we will bring you to our cooperation," House Speaker Thomas S. Foley (D-Wash.) said.

In response, Clinton suggested jokingly that Foley must be unaware of Clinton's record of heavy legislative lobbying when he was governor of Arkansas. "I can't believe you were fully briefed about my proclivities in lobbying legislators to let me come up here without an invitation. I may be here all the time."

Even Dole was brought into the joshing. As Foley spoke of dealing with what he called the "heavy tangle" of legislative challenges, "my head, almost as if by magic, tilted in Senator Dole's direction," Clinton quipped.

Dole returned the barbed kidding in kind. He praised Clinton's inaugural speech as "eloquent and to the point," especially in its reference to sacrifice, and pledged cooperation up to a point. "Our intention will not be to create gridlock—except maybe from time to time," he said later during a Senate speech.

Republicans seemed to find as much to like in Clinton's address as Democrats did. "It sent the right signals for our people. . . . Clearly there's a message of hope out in the country, and now we've got to produce," Sen. Pete V. Domenici (R-N.M.) said. "I sensed a somber mood that reflected the challenges that face us," Sen. Connie Mack (R-Fla.) added. "He essentially challenged Americans to service. It was almost Kennedy-like in that sense."

But there also were some Republican storm clouds, largely in anticipation of a decision Clinton must make today under the 1990 budget agreement on whether to go back to the fixed targets for deficit reduction that were required by the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings budget-balancing legislation. If he takes this approach, as Republicans have been urging, it would trigger automatic across-the-board spending cuts totaling $22.4 billion.

"If he rejects fixed targets, I'm going to see that as an early signal that deficit reduction has ceased to be a priority," said Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.), a cosponsor of the legislation.

Gramm said a Clinton rejection of fixed targets would mark the beginning of the end of the GOP honeymoon with the new administration on budget matters.

New members praised Clinton's official debut with some caveats. "It sets the right tone, but like any other inaugural speech I've ever heard, it demands a lot of follow-up," said Rep. Michael N. Castle (R), a former Delaware governor.

Rep. Earl F. Hilliard (D-Ala.) called it a "very positive, upbeat address," but noted a contrast between Clinton's campaign and inaugural rhetoric. During the campaign, it was always " 'I' when he was talking about what he was going to do," Hilliard said. Now the problems are before him and "so it's now 'We,' " he added.

Staff writers Kevin Merida and Eric Pianin contributed to this report.

Gain Quick Senate Approval

Bush Signs Senate Resolution Cutting Bentsen's Cabinet Pay

Associated Press

As one of his last official acts, President Bush signed a Senate resolution cutting the pay of Lloyd Bentsen, the former Texas senator who has been confirmed as President Clinton's treasury secretary.

It reduces Bentsen's compensation from $144,000 to $99,000 a year, the 1989 level, to comply with 1989 pay legislation.